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CHAPTER 5

The Task of Knowledgeable Love:
Arendt and Portmann in Search of Meaning

Anne O’Byrne

When striving to re-form the pattern of our own way of life, we often invoke Nature as our great teacher, seeking to justify man’s actions by arguments based on what happens in nature.

—ADOLF PORTMANN, Forms and Patterns of Animals

Grammatology must pursue and consolidate whatever, in scientific practice, has always already begun to exceed the logocentric closure.

—JACQUES DERRIDA, Positions

The natural sciences . . . have done the “unthinkable,” and now use thinking to try to grasp what they have done.

—HANNAH ARENDT, D XXIV.58.643

In 1966, notes begin to appear in Arendt’s Denktagebuch about the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann and his studies of morphology, the appearances of animals.¹ One of his early studies, The Beauty of Butterflies from 1936, concerns the variety in the size, shape, and color of butterflies, and the book’s title already suggests that this is an unusual scientist.² His work evidently begins in wonder and remains suffused with it throughout. Instead of submitting the phenomenon of this variety—and for him butterflies are just one terrifically flamboyant example—to the demands of natural and sexual selection as the mainstream of evolutionary theory would have it, Portmann identifies in pattern and color an Aristotelian desire to appear. Functionalism, the approach dominant in his discipline, would require him to ask why there should be such variety. What purpose does it serve? How does it further the evolutionary development of the species? What is its function? What is expressed in these colors? He insists, though, on speaking of beauty and remaining at the level of appearance.

By this point in her career, Arendt had long been concerned with appearance: Rahel Varnhagen’s appearance in high society; Pericles’s appearance before his fellow Athenians; the appearance of each of us as natal beings.
She has also long been attuned to the work of scientists, whether on the Sputnik project or on splitting the atom or in basic research. What is new here is the fact that Portmann is a biologist, and that, for him, appearance is interesting specifically as the appearance of the natural world around us. His studies extend from butterflies to Mediterranean sea snails, and his examples include tulip poplars, wild carrots, tawny owls, and embryos of many species of mammal. His theory and practice of morphology became an unorthodox strand within evolutionary theory. In addition, he developed the thought of human neoteny in a work devoted to the various morphologies of the first year of human life.

As a result, the Denktagebuch entries on Portmann turn out to be entrances onto the realm of life or, more to the point, onto a distinctive and dynamic thinking of life. What can this mean for Arendt, for whom life was another long-term, troublesome interest? What drew her to Portmann's work? Sometimes life is for her a matter of zoe, the merely living existence that threatens to take over the sphere of human action and freedom, and sometimes it is bios, the worldly life of human beings. Sometimes it is both; natality, for example, is for Arendt a matter of our natural mammalian emergence from our mothers' bodies but also the signal of our capacity for the highest, most distinctively human actions. But the bios/zoe distinction is hardly relevant to Portmann, who regards his work as biology and zoology and eventually also as anthropology. Given this, what status can Arendt grant the insights he offers? Are they the incontrovertible, compelling truths of scientific knowledge (D XXIV.14.622) or the more speculative—and therefore more politically and philosophically interesting—claims of a human science? Are they the cognitive products of empirical study or the worldly manifestation of thought? Are they a matter, in Kantian terms, of Verstand or of Vernunft? Are they contributions to our knowledge of the functioning of bodies or to our appreciation of the intensities of life?

Philosophers who approach the sciences—and indeed other disciplines within the humanities—sometimes proceed as if they know more than they do, or as if their capacity for metalevel analysis equips them to understand what they find going on among the scientists. They may even behave as if their theoretical point of view makes it unnecessary to understand the detail and technicality of what they see, which might be part of the reason why Arendt, despite her philosophical training, refused to describe herself as a philosopher. She took seriously the need to avoid philosophical hubris by educating herself as any member of the reading public would; in the case of biology, this meant reading Portmann's books, among others. Yet, while she may have turned to him as a popular scientist, to be appreciated for his
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ability to translate his research into layman’s terms, she engages his work as a fellow thinker of the human condition, a fellow member of the reading and writing public. Passing through her Denktagebuch notes and The Life of the Mind to his thinking of life leads us to their meeting place in the question of meaning.

There we find both the thinker of political life and the observer of sea sponges, the student of the totalitarian system and the critic of technological thinking, the professor who urges us to love the world enough to take responsibility for it and the one who leads us back to a childish love for a zebra’s stripes, both of them reaching for a love of the shared world that must be both knowledgeable and thoughtful.

The Circle of Thought and the Metaphor of Life

The Life of the Mind, originally envisioned as a sequel to The Human Condition, begins with a volume on thinking, which in turn begins with a section on appearance. The book was first published in 1978, having been presented as part of the Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in 1973, but the connection between thinking and appearing emerged earlier in Arendt’s thought and was concisely formulated in a Denktagebuch entry made in November 1968:

Re: volume II of Human Condition: All that lives strives to appear (see Portmann). All functions show themselves—but not the silent dialogue of thinking, not the will and also not judgment. They are, without necessarily coming into appearance.

“Being shows itself as thought” (Heidegger, Identity and Difference, p. 48). And how does thinking show itself? (D XXVI.1.701)

The note captures the phenomenological sensibility that is evident throughout her work, not only with the quotation from Heidegger but also with the reference to Portmann’s morphology. Portmann is mentioned in the Denktagebuch between 1966 and 1968, in the period when the thinking that would come to light in the 1973 lectures was under way—whatever that might mean. This is Arendt’s question.

After all, we each appear into a world and it is not a matter of mere appearing or a mode of existence that is somehow second best. We are the sort of beings who see and are seen and for whom appearing is active, a vital element of existence. For us, being is appearing. As living beings we are not accidentally located in the world but belong to the world even as it belongs to us. It was old when we arrived in it, and it will persist even when we have gone, so our experience of time and finitude is shaped by the arc
of life between birth and death, that is, our appearance on the earth and eventual disappearance from it. Our first appearing presupposed a spectator, so our being in the world is never in the singular; we exist here in the plural. Also, seeing and sentience are not abstractions; the world appears to us in the ways made possible by the specific bodies and senses we have. Arendt writes: “Seen from the perspective of the world, every creature born into it arrives well equipped to deal with a world in which Being and Appearing coincide.” Without mentioning its source, she sets about correcting Heidegger’s assertion that animals are poor in world by celebrating a diversity of rich human and nonhuman worlds. She writes:

Nothing perhaps is more surprising in this world of ours than the almost infinite diversity of its appearances, the sheer entertainment value of its views, sounds and smells, something that is hardly mentioned by the thinkers and philosophers. . . . This diversity is matched by an equally astounding diverseness of sense organs among the animal species, so that what actually appears to living creatures assumes the greatest variety of form and shape: every animal species lives in a world of its own, [though] all sense-endowed creatures have appearance as such in common, first, an appearing world and second . . . the fact that they themselves are appearing and disappearing creatures.

There is an important train in Arendt’s thought that stretches from The Human Condition, with its thinking of world and worldly action as appearance, to the late Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, where attention is turned to the actor/spectators who together sense and make sense of the appearing world. The abiding image of the first is of Pericles—statesman and general—addressing his fellow Athenians, while the image that endures from the second is that of the uninvolved spectators on the events of the French Revolution, whose watchful participation “make the event at home in the history of the world.” In those late lectures, the spectators’ participation relies on a distinctive human capacity, the sensus communis or Menschenverstand, the common understanding of man. As this thought train passes through The Life of the Mind and the question of how thinking appears, we will see Socrates emerge as the revelatory figure. Yet here, at the point early in The Life of the Mind where her thinking encounters Portmann’s, what is important is that appearances are sensed, and that sensing is the province of all sentient beings. Arendt now has the occasion to consider the material specificity of every point of view; the world—any world—is the product of distinct, species-specific body forms. Beetles’ eyes give them a rich world quite different from ours. We do not share their world—we don’t have the
eyes for it—but we appear in it and they appear in ours. Indeed, they appear to us in a variety of sizes, shapes, and colors that confirms Arendt’s insight that the flood of appearances, in all its diversity and abundance, is endlessly entertaining to us. If there is a figure to accompany this stage in her thought, it is that of the natural scientist observing the living world.

Elsewhere, when Arendt is concerned with the work of scientists, her examples are physicists, and the scientific projects that appear on the pages of her works are typically the great physics projects of the mid–twentieth century that culminated in splitting the atom and the technological development of the atomic bomb. The worldly moment that opens The Human Condition is the launch of Sputnik, while the image of scientific work that concludes the book is of scientists working together to initiate a new process in nature. Biology could readily provide the model, but for Arendt the release of atomic energy into nature remains paradigmatic. This is not surprising. World War II and the Cold War meant that the work of Meitner, Hahn, Straussman, and Frisch would quickly surge to political significance and public consciousness; they discovered nuclear fission in 1938, and in 1945 Hahn was awarded the Nobel Prize. In that same year the United States dropped atomic bombs on Japan. Crick, Watson, Wilkins, and Franklin discovered the structure of DNA in 1953, and the discovery earned the Nobel Prize in 1962. The emergence of biotechnology happened rather more slowly, and the significance of the changes underway in the science of life—so present to us now—drew public attention more gradually.

Yet, since Arendt is a thinker concerned with the life conditions of natality and mortality, we could reasonably expect her to be attuned to changes in the understanding of life. After all, Sputnik was significant for our human condition not because of the engineering and rocket science that brought it into being but because its launch promised to change the human condition of living on Earth and sharing the planet with all other humans. In fact, Arendt was clearly interested in biology. Her library holds several volumes, with marginalia in her hand, of contemporary works in popular biology including What Is Life? by Erwin Schrödinger, Man and the Living World by Karl Von Frisch (not to be confused with the fission physicist Otto Robert Frisch), and The Language of Life: An Introduction to the Science of Genetics by George and Muriel Beadle.9 In addition, she followed Hans Jonas’s prescient work on bioengineering, and, as we have seen, she owned and read several volumes of Portmann’s work.

What these have in common is a commitment to the scientific mode of encountering the world, paired with an appreciation of its limits. Arendt notes a passage where Schrödinger, writing about the physics of life, states:
It is the four dimensional pattern of the “phenotype,” the visible and manifest nature of the individual, which is reproduced without appreciable change for generations, permanent within centuries—though not within tens of thousands of years—and borne at each transmission by the material structure of the nuclei of the two cells which unite to form the fertilized egg cell. That is a marvel—than which only one is greater, one that is intimately connected with it, yet lies on a different plane. I mean the fact that we, whose total being is entirely based on a marvellous interplay of this very kind, yet possess the power of acquiring considerable knowledge about it. I think it possible that this knowledge may advance to little short of a complete understanding—of the first marvel. The second may be beyond human understanding.

The distinction Schrödinger couches in mystical terms is the distinction between knowledge, which holds out the promise of completeness, and the being of the knower, which inevitably exceeds knowledge and confounds all efforts at completion.

When Beadle and Beadle describe the process of genetic mutation and its workings in evolution, they, too, run up against a limit. Arendt marks this passage: “One gasps a bit on contemplating the exquisite timing that was necessary—not to bring us into being but just to make us possible. Nature must have made mistakes by the millions.” The gasp comes when we realize the scale of the universe and the fact that our existence depends on contingency upon contingency, but embedded in this experience is the additional realization that nature, which science must approach as though it were a rule-governed system, must have deviated from those rules many times in order for our existence to be even possible. Not only are we incapable of accounting for our having come into being, but it is also beyond knowledge. Our existence as the beings we are could not have been predicted. What’s more, genetic mutation is only part of the picture. In Portmann’s *Neue Wege in Biologie*, Arendt marks this passage with an exclamation mark: “One of the most reliable arrangements there is for the regular occurrence of new combinations is that curious game that biologists call sexuality.”

What we gain from scientific encounters with the world is truth, but the gap between knowing and being—indicated by Schrödinger, hinted at by Arendt in the closing pages of *The Human Condition*, and indeed worked through by Kant in the Transcendental Aesthetic—persists, and generates the distinction between truth and meaning. Along with a desire to know, we have a need for meaning, which is pursued through the activity of thinking. Cognition not only cannot give us meaning, but it also disguises that
fact by covering over the gap even as it uncovers truth. The science of life, and indeed our everyday way of knowing, approach the living organism as capable of full appearance in the course of its short life; it suggests that nothing bars our way to complete knowledge of it and, if knowledge is true and complete, why should there by a need for meaning? In contrast, Arendt argues that the living body does not give itself unreservedly to the observing eye; the constant changes that are part of metabolism, growth, and aging mean that any state of a living body is a passing state, and the condition of being alive does not allow living bodies to be revealed in the ways that dead matter can be. The incompleteness of our knowledge of living beings is constitutive rather than incidental or merely temporary. Thus science runs up against its limits, opening the space where the question of meaning arises.

Philosophy is apt to occupy this space, but Arendt resists philosophy’s metaphysical tendency—established by Plato—to construe it as the gap between two worlds. Invariably, the otherworldly cause of appearance is granted more reality than the appearance itself—think not only of Plato’s forms but also Descartes’s causal argument from the Second Meditation—so that appearances must be penetrated in order to get to their ground and therefore their meaning. More surprisingly, she regards modern science as giving new life to this old tendency. Science keeps its eyes turned toward this one world, but it persists in delving behind appearance in search of truth, privileging the base of appearance above the appearance itself. This is what happens when the colors of a bird are understood only in reference to the evolutionary function that they serve, that is, when the wealth of appearance is reduced to the life process.

This move beyond appearance is not our only alternative. Indeed, for Arendt, it is no alternative at all, since we must live in the world of appearances. The choice between appearance and reality is a false dilemma that, in its modern version, has its roots in the failure to grasp the distinction between Kant’s Verstand or Intellect, which allows us to know, and Vernunft or Reason, which drives us to pursue meaning. The former gives access to the world that appears to our senses; the latter has been understood as leading us to ask for the meaning behind appearances. But what Kant does when he discerns a world where the things in themselves are as we are in our world of appearances is identify a semblance of reason or an authentic semblance. Earlier, Arendt cited Portmann’s distinction between authentic appearances, that is, appearances that present themselves, and inauthentic appearances, which are forced into view as an animal’s inner organs are brought to light by dissection. Now, applying the language of authenticity
and inauthenticity to semblance and tracing Kant’s discovery to the experience of thinking, she hones her thesis to a fine point:

Hence, in our context the only relevant question is whether the semblances are inauthentic or authentic ones, whether they are caused by dogmatic beliefs and arbitrary assumptions, mere mirages that disappear upon closer inspection, or whether they are inherent in the paradoxical condition of a living being that though itself part of the world of appearances, is in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it.16

Does such worldly thinking appear? As we saw in the Denktagebuch note, the form that Arendt’s question for The Human Condition II took in 1968 was “How does thinking show itself?” In the course of these early sections of Life of the Mind she struggles to find a way to think about thinking, and the formulations of the question accumulate, each one supplementing rather than supplanting its precursors. The initial version “What is thinking?” persists as an expression of the philosophical desire for an analytic starting point; “Why do we think?” is entertained briefly, suggesting a hope for existential insight into internal motivations; later, “What makes us think?” acknowledges the impossibility of grasping internal processes and looks instead for the external circumstances that provoke the activity of thinking. Behind all three lingers the Denktagebuch formulation, reminding us that whatever habits of thinking we develop, and however insurmountable the requirement that thinking be conducted in withdrawal from the world, we continue to live in the world of appearances. Thinking is an activity of living beings. Thinking about thinking must somehow bridge the gulf between the visible and the invisible, the world of appearance and the thinking ego, and it cannot do this using either empirical study or dialectical philosophical speculation, that is, what Arendt describes as Hegel’s “speculative cognition.”17 Rather, thought is carried across such gulfs by metaphor. But which metaphor? Arendt considers and rejects the traditional model of sight, which remains too firmly tied to the sense of sight and therefore to cognition, before concluding, “The only possible metaphor one may conceive of for the life of the mind is the sensation of being alive. Without the breath of life the human body is a corpse; without thinking the human mind is dead.”18

She embraces this metaphor. Just as the life process turns in a circle, so—citing Aristotle, Hegel, and Heidegger—she finds thinkers insisting on the circular motion of thought. If thinking were identical with cognition, it
would share its rectilinear trajectory from the quest for the object to cognition of that object; instead, thinking has an “unceasing motion, that is, motion in a circle” that has no end and no product (Aristotle). Certainly the trajectory of an individual life is rectilinear, stretching from birth to death, but it is also inevitably folded, with the birth and death of successive generations, into the natural cycles of the life process.

Yet, for all that, she pronounces the metaphor empty.\textsuperscript{19} “It obviously refuses to answer the inevitable question, Why do we think?, since there is no answer to the question, Why do we live?”\textsuperscript{20} Quickly—precipitously—she abandons it and changes the question, quoting the Wittgenstein of the \textit{Philosophical Investigations}:

How can we find out why man thinks? Whereupon he answers: “It often happens that we only become aware of the important facts, if we suppress the question ‘why?’ . . . . It is in a deliberate effort to suppress the question, Why do we think? that I shall deal with the question, What makes us think?”\textsuperscript{21}

It is true that we cannot answer the question of why we live, but this alone does not render the metaphor useless. Moving more slowly and drawing on other resources in her thinking, it becomes clear that Wittgenstein’s strategy can be applied to the question of life too, leading us to give up “Why?” in favor of “What is life?” or “What is it, to live?” Indeed, even though at this point at the end of the “Appearance” section of \textit{The Life of the Mind}, Arendt moves away from the metaphor of life toward the model of Socrates, life will soon emerge again in her specific attention to the \textit{life} of Socrates. Moreover, by this same point, she has also made it possible to explicitly pursue the question of life in deeper and more revealing ways. In the course of her engagement with Portmann, she has implicitly mobilized a distinctive form of scientific thinking that is ready for these questions and committed to pursuing them hermeneutically in the world of appearances. It may turn out that thinking about thinking still requires models, but perhaps, along with the familiar model of Socrates, we can also have Thales, and Aristotle, and indeed the young Socrates. If Plato’s Socrates rarely ventured outside the walls of Athens and devoted his passionate attention to human affairs, Thales looked at the stars and Aristotle thought not only about politics and metaphysics but also the parts and generation of animals.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{The Intensification of Life}

Portmann, whose career as a zoologist, biologist, and public intellectual stretched from the 1920s into the 1970s, saw himself as engaged in a shift
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in the sciences that reoriented our relation to the natural world. This was not a paradigm shift, nor indeed a change that was distinctive to the twentieth century or even to modernity, and it was not a change that would eventually be carried through and brought to completion; rather it happened in every epoch, to all peoples, and indeed in the course of each human life. What he described was a move from the primary, urprimitiv experience of being in relation to the world, on the one hand, to the secondary, scientific worldview on the other. “This drama renews itself in every experience of becoming,” he wrote in 1960. The form it took in his field, in his time, was a move away from the observation and description of forms of life as they appear, and towards those investigations in physics, chemistry, and biology that delve into the unseen, reaching for their evidence beyond what is available to the naked eye or indeed made available by the microscope. Why should subatomic physics and molecular biology come to dominate as they did? Because, according to Portmann, they are propelled by the conviction that it is in the realm of the unseen that the key to the mastery of nature lies.

The critique is not unfamiliar. Feminist philosophers took up a version of it in the 1980s as they reread early modern philosophers and found them deploying a masculinist, objectivist worldview that would turn out to destroy the intimacy of our relation with the mothering natural world. It would also have been familiar to Portmann’s audience in another version, Goethe’s botany, which was a study of the observed forms of living plants. As we have seen, Arendt shares this sensibility in her affirmation of appearance and her rejection of otherworldly sources of meaning. Portmann, for his part, had no illusion that his style of morphological research would or should supplant the predominant form of scientific research. He had a clear view of the forces that drove science to focus on questions involving the general functions of life and to pursue the most general laws of biology, but, in Animal Forms and Patterns (1948), he sketched them in a way that was far from celebratory. Certainly, the scientific knowledge that had been amassed using this method had been put to work healing the sick and making us more productive, but also simply exerting power over material things and developing technologies of destruction. This was three years after the liberation of Auschwitz and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He dramatized the distinction between the primary and secondary views of the natural world over the course of many works, and argued for the primitive view as a corrective to the dominant scientific approach. At some moments the arguments are epistemological. In Animal Forms, he notes that “the search for the general laws of life has produced more facts
than we can yet grasp.” Borrowing a metaphor from the biologist J. von Uexküll, he describes this blizzard of facts as initially allowing us to look at the world anew but soon hiding and immobilizing a great wealth of detail under a blanket of frozen truths. The sheer abundance of facts begins to hinder our attempts to understand them. Portmann writes:

By aiming all the time at discovering the laws of nature, it has been completely overlooked that, in doing this, one of the most important general laws has been utterly forgotten, one of the most universal phenomena of all: the constant production in the course of the earth’s history of new organic life.

In the face of the ever-changing, ever-expanding, frankly troublesome variety of manifestations of life, laws of nature that promise constancy—or at least relative stability—are certainly appealing. As Arendt might put it, they provide the banisters that could help scientists toward true claims about the world. As Portmann does put it, they help produce scientific knowledge that can be deployed in “the many utilitarian tasks which are associated with the building up of human civilization and the control of natural forces.” The problem comes when, falling between the two stools of abundant, uninterpretable facts and elusive general laws, we forget the value of looking attentively at the things in the world as themselves a source of meaning.

It is not a matter of just any sort of looking. When we allow function to provide the context for what we see, our observations turn out to reinforce the evolutionary principles of natural and sexual selection. Thus, the shape of a dolphin is the right shape for a fast swimmer; the long legs of the antelope are appropriate for an animal that runs on grassland; the wing of a bird is perfectly adapted to flight. Portmann writes: “This utmost purposiveness, this perfect agreement between form and function, is considered to be the way in which Nature really works.” But this is backward thinking. It directs our attention almost exclusively to these technical forms of life, constantly reinforcing the significance of whatever coincides with function and allowing us to neglect “the immense field of animal forms which mean little or nothing to our technical sense.” For Portmann, this is at least dissatisfying, at most a dangerous dismissal of other organisms that show a less compelling form-function relationship as “rabble or vermin, monsters or abortions, worm or maggots, a collection of monstrosities from which just a few groups are separated off to receive a one-sided aesthetic respect.” Remember: This work is from 1948. The critique is immanent to the theory of functionalism, but the moral impulse is undisguised.
In Arendt’s thinking, this same resistance to instrumentality springs from a political impulse. If the political sphere is the place for activities that can only be understood in terms of means and ends, it can no longer be the realm of action. Action escapes this schema since it is an open-ended process that exceeds any purpose or use. For the Greeks, action and speech served no end beyond themselves; they were only in actuality and were therefore the highest activities of the political realm. Like healing, flute playing, and playacting, speech and action are activities where the product is identical with the performance, and performance needs spectators, those who know how to look without looking for means and ends.

For Portmann, it is not a matter of contrasting overdetermined, technological looking with a pure, naive looking that lets the world simply show itself. When we turn our careful attention to the living world, we will make sense of it only if we bring categories of some sort to bear. Without them, we are forced to resort to life itself as the sole value, which (1) amounts to producing a biology with no logos and (2) reinforces the rise of animal laborans that Arendt regards with such dismay and marks the destruction of political life. Portmann does not resist taxonomy or indeed hierarchy but, crucially, he does not endorse the hierarchical relationship between appearance and a hidden reality. Rather, the significant difference is between the dim life of simple marine animals on the one hand and “the higher type of existence” on the other, and the relevant gauge is the intensity of living, specifically, the intensity of communal life. He writes:

> Barnacles which colonize the inter-tidal zones of the rocky shores in dense crowds . . . form a poor and dumb sort of animal association compared with the schools of fish or better still, with a noisy colony of breeding birds in which the living together shows many of the features which we meet in the life of the higher animals, as well as in our own human society.33

The argument is open to the objections Portmann himself made to the functionalists: if we choose technical efficiency as the relevant value, we will get a hierarchy of functional forms; if we choose communal intensity as our value it will be a hierarchy of community life. Portmann was surely aware of this but does not allow it to dismantle his position. He proposes his alternative taxonomy in the spirit of liberal dissent, offering it as a point of resistance to the hegemony of instrumental thinking that subjects scientific research to the aims of technology. There is room enough for both. Yet this is not a matter of dissent alone. Portmann’s preference for intensified life springs from a positive desire for a “ Fuller, richer concept of living
forms.”

Despite his use of aesthetic language, and despite the fact that we will soon see him translate his view into economic, social and political terms, this emerges as a distinctly scientific value. He argues that “research has various aims, not only that of controlling the forces of nature, the one most intensively sought after and promoted at the present time.”

A richer concept allows us to know more, and has the salutary effect of bringing us to the limits of knowledge. Scientific research leads us to mystery, and the humility forced on us in the experience of that limit is the antidote to the hubris that comes with technological prowess. From the point of view of technology, this is useless. In the Kantian terms Arendt uses in The Life of the Mind, functionalism presents itself as a matter of Reason (Vernunft) generating an account of the meaning of appearances, but in fact it never reaches beyond knowledge and perception (Verstand). In contrast, and counterintuitively, it is Portmann’s insistence on the value of patterns and surface, precisely on the value of appearance, that is the work of Reason.

For Portmann, technological uselessness is to be celebrated. At the end of Animal Forms, the scientist emerges as social critic and issues his clarion call:

As soon as the powers of production are no longer organized and increased so overwhelmingly with a view to destruction, as soon as there is a real opportunity for the many to have free, true leisure, then the unquenchable urge for work will turn also towards those spheres where there are only “useless” values to be gained; where it is not only that feeling of power which comes from domination that will determine what shall be sought out, but it will be rather the awe that surrounds the mysterious.

If the deepest value is the intensification of life in communal living, we find ourselves gazing at the world as an artist might, allowing ourselves to be moved by the realization all around us of possibilities of existence that are different from our own, and experiencing something “which seems at times to be like the bonds of brotherhood, albeit one which it is difficult to grasp.”

All of this is available to us thanks to appearances. Arendt does not share Portmann’s inclination toward fraternity or the mysterious but she does want the knowledge gathered from looking at the world in the way Portmann does to be brought to bear on our human condition. She writes in the Denktagebuch: “Whatever part of us is appearance is, among other things, ‘a broadcast meant to be picked up by receivers’ (Portmann), that is, it indi-
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cates a with-world [Mitwelt]. We are ‘social’ beings, insofar as we appear” (D XXIV.64.647).

In *The Human Condition*, first birth, the biological event of appearing in the world, was the signal of our second birth, that is, our capacity for spontaneous action. Now appearance indicates the with-world. It is not a matter of biology providing a metaphor for understanding our existence. Nor is it a matter of scientific research producing incontrovertible truths that simply compel affirmation. Nor is it a matter of substituting Thales for Socrates as a model of thinking. Rather, what is at work here is something more like Heidegger’s practice of formal indication. When Heidegger uses the phrase in his lecture courses of 1919 and the early 1920s, what he has in mind is the need for his students to reach into their own experience in search of the initial pointers that will get phenomenological research under way. (Arendt began to study with him in 1924.) Rather than take the world as merely given in its laws and its details, and rather than launch immediately into abstraction, they must examine their experience and set about describing it in ways that will lead to truth, phenomenologically understood.40

For Arendt and Portmann, this approach produces a hermeneutic phenomenology, a way of looking at the world that engages and transforms the viewer. It is at work in *The Human Condition* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the two works Arendt cites as having prompted the questions that set *The Life of the Mind* under way.41 For Portmann, our experience of the variety of butterfly colors opens up reflection on the seen and the one who sees, moving us from the naïve—childlike—enjoyment of the colors to questions of what each one in particular means and what the very fact of their variety can mean. What might it mean for butterflies, and what might if mean for us? In Heidegger’s terminology, this is the shift from ontic information to ontological meaning, and this shift happens repeatedly as we move around the hermeneutic circle, never quite arriving back at the point from which we started because who we are has undergone its own changes along the way. We can imagine Portmann on his journey around the circle. Driven by the curiosity he describes himself as having felt from an early age, he turns his attention to the natural world and is struck by an awe that inspires him to keep looking ever more carefully and attentively. He accumulates knowledge, becomes an expert in certain marine life forms of the Baltic Sea, looks some more, and then more, and so on. The appearances continue to appear and the growing understanding of them is not a matter of penetrating beneath the surface to the hidden depth or of surpassing mere appearance on the way to the essence of
the thing. Rather, it is a matter of learning to see. It is also a matter of learning to love.

Conclusion: Love and Knowledge

Arendt’s highest hope for thinking is that it should prevent the thinker doing evil, and that we should be able to require it of everyone. It is no accident that, once the question “How does thinking appear?” brought her to the thought of life, the model life she identifies would be the one that most perfectly fulfills these hopes. Socrates was convinced that no one could knowingly commit evil, and his life was spent requiring thinking of everyone he met. This was not a matter of prescription. In the *Apoloogy* he describes himself as having spent his life reproving his fellow Athenians, and indeed the final favor he asks of them is that they do the same for his sons “if they value riches or anything over virtue or if they think they are something when they are nothing.” The requirement to think is not, then, a law to be enforced but a practice to be cultivated in the course of an education and a life lived in the polis.

To be sure, Arendt’s appeal to the model of Socrates’s life is immensely productive for her investigation of the life of the mind: It opens up a discussion of thinking as the conversation of the two in one; the Socratic *daimon* provides a model of conscience; his habit of spending his time in the agora brings thinking to—if not exactly into—public life, where it becomes something we can all participate in, just as we all participate in the life of the city. Socrates devoted himself to thinking, yet refused to think of himself as possessed of any expertise, with one exception. As Arendt points out, he acknowledged that he did know something about love: “By some means or other I have received from heaven the gift of being able to detect at a glance both a lover and a beloved.” Yet how does love appear? The dialogue—in good Socratic fashion—delivers no definition of love or friendship, preferring to leave the readers and listeners more puzzled at the end than they were at the beginning. But throughout the conversation we are shown love in the glances that pass between the men, the blushes, the whispered conversations, the gaze that Hippothales turns on the beloved Lysis, in a word, the attention that love pays. And no one is more attentive than Socrates.

In “The Crisis in Education,” Arendt describes education as the point at which we decide if we love the world enough to take responsibility for it. The world she has in mind is the human world, the one made by the work of our hands, and what we are asked to be responsible for is the accumulation of human history that has made it as it is. The educator shows this world to
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the new generation, asking the newcomers to attend to it and, in taking joint responsibility, to also tend to it. Socrates is a superbly worldly figure in this sense. The object of his attention, the focus of his questioning, and the object of his lifelong examination was life as it is lived by humans in the polis. Arendt’s writing on Portmann invites us to imagine a Socratic naturalist, someone who extends his attention beyond the affairs of the city to the natural world, a thinker for whom the examined life involves an examination of the lives of nonhuman living beings with whom we share the planet. It invites us to imagine a Socratic mode of encountering those beings that does not rely on either a Platonic theory of forms or an Aristotelian understanding of teleologies, but on a phenomenological practice of looking.45

Portmann was himself such an educator and such a naturalist. His colleague at Basel Karl Jaspers described the task of the university teacher as bringing about in the student an internal turn (Umkehr). Portmann, speaking on the same occasion—the five hundredth anniversary of the founding of the University of Basel—concluded his lecture, “Natural Science and Humanity,” with this glance toward the future:

This, then, is my wish for the future working of our university: that the young people who come here seeking what they need for their development, on the one hand, and their instructors, on the other, will never lack the spirit that is essential if we are to bring the paradoxical mosaic of our life into the service of the tasks before us: what I mean is the great gift of knowledgeable love.46

Notes
1. My thanks to Roger Berkowitz and Jeff Champlin for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this work.
4. Ibid., 20.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 65.
8. Ibid., 70.

15. Ibid., 25.
16. Ibid., 45.
17. Ibid., 123, 124.
18. Ibid., 123.
19. Ibid., 124.
20. Ibid., 125.
21. Ibid.
22. Note that the young Socrates was possessed of an extraordinary passion for natural science (Phaedo 96a).

26. Ibid., 202, 216.
27. Ibid., 202.
28. Ibid., 203.
29. Ibid., 202.
30. Ibid., 210.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 183.
34. Ibid., 218.
35. Ibid., 216.
36. Ibid., 220.
39. Ibid., 220.
40. See Sorensen Overgaard, *Husserl and Heidegger on Being in the World* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), 84 “Being thus almost devoid of descriptive con-
tent, the initial indications can be called formal—they are not descriptive but are more like signposts that tell us where to look for description.”


42. *Apology*, 41e.


45. As noted, the Socrates that appears in Plato’s *Phaedo* was once a student of the natural world (96a–100b), and the Socrates Aristophanes presents in *Clouds* appears to offer his students knowledge of everything from insects to stars. The one is a Socrates on his way from the question of causation to a theory of forms, the other a charlatan on his way to showing young men how to escape their debts.